A CHILD OF NATURE

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HAMILTON WRIGHT MABIE

A Merry Xmas
to E.C. & J.L.C.

1902—

Cloke,
Bookseller,
Hamilton.

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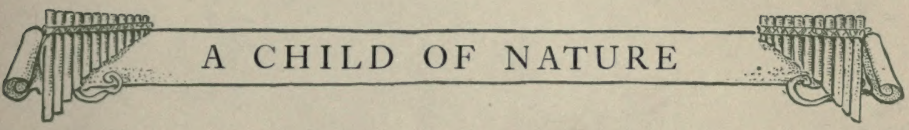
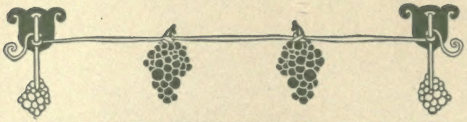

A CHILD OF NATURE



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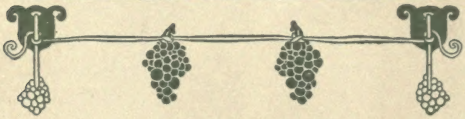

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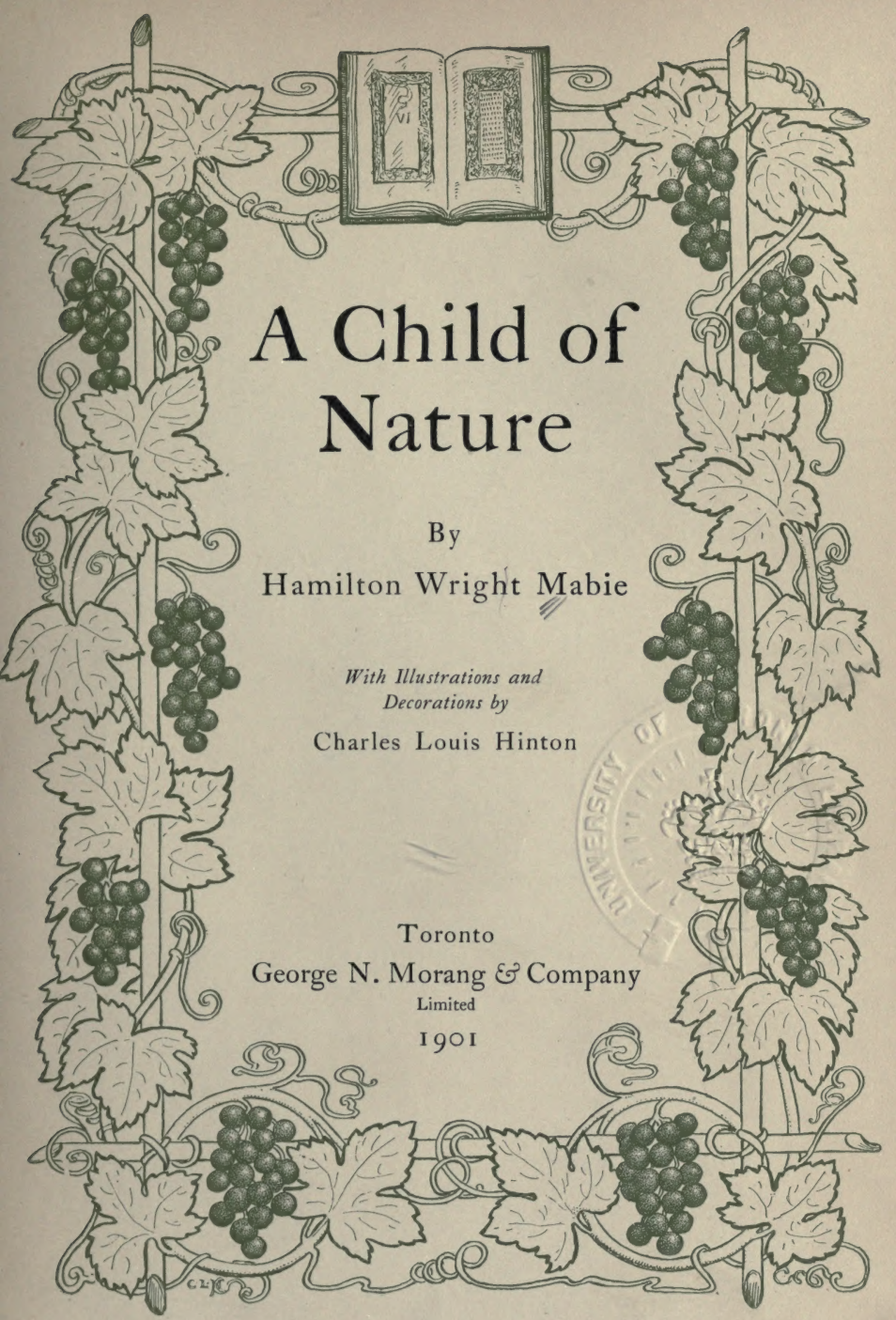

A Child of Nature

By

Hamilton Wright Mabie

With Illustrations and Decorations by

Charles Louis Hinton

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TO

J. B. H.

AND

A. L. B.

AND TO THOSE WHO HAVE "GONE
INTO THE WORLD OF
LIGHT"

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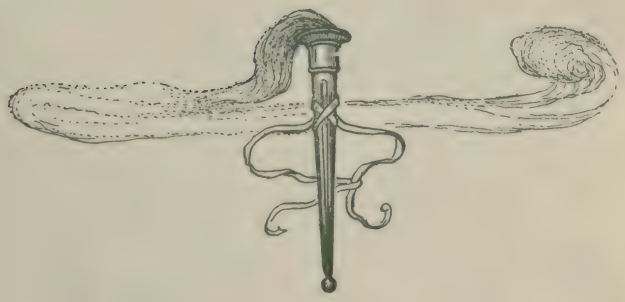
I

My Heart leaps up when I behold
A Rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a Man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is Father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.



A CHILD OF NATURE

I

IT was late in April when John Foster's life, long sinking, like a flickering flame, suddenly went out. He was not an old man so far as years went, but he had lived his life as completely as if his three-score had been lengthened into four-score years and ten. Those who knew him best, and they were few, had marked a sudden change not long before; a relaxation of purpose in a face that had always reflected the man's

mind and heart swiftly and unerringly. The quietude and acquiescence that followed a lifelong intensity of expression meant no surrender, but rather a fulfilment of purpose; the concentration of nature was no longer necessary; and the bow, long bent, sprung swiftly back. The neighbours, as they went silently into the darkened room, were awed by the victorious calm which touched the rugged features with something of supernal beauty. The face had been full of an inscrutable meaning, but it had never before borne such an expression not only of quiet acceptance, but of final peace.

Some of the older men, hard-handed

and hard-minded farmers, whose life had been an unbroken struggle with reluctant soil and uncertain skies, instinctively resented the calm assurance of success which rested on John Foster's face like a decisive judgment on his life. These older men had looked askance at their neighbour for half a century, and they mutely protested against the irrevocable reversal of their judgment which the touch of death had made clear beyond all questioning. To their unsympathetic glance there was something almost immoral in this assumption of success by one whose career had been an obvious failure. There had been no evil in John Foster; the hardest of

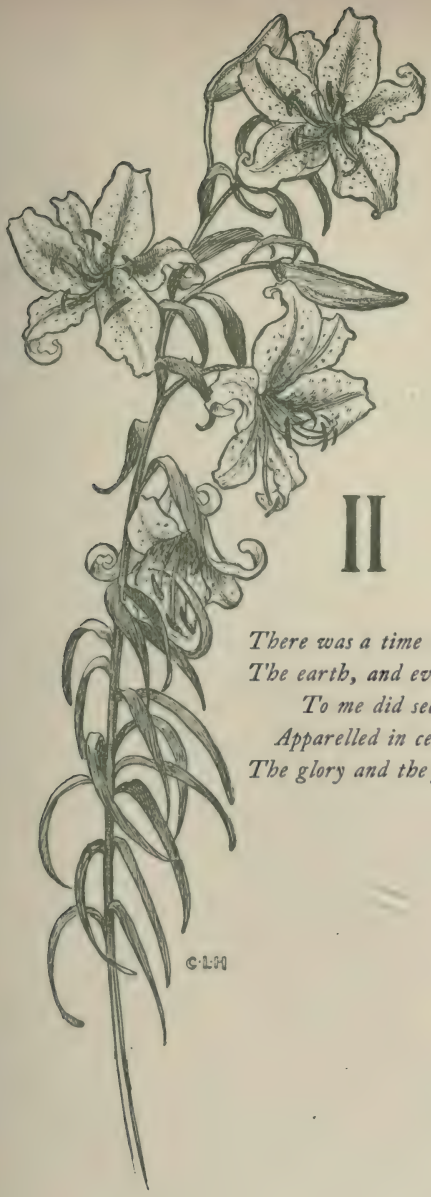
the dry-eyed and sober-visaged men never laid any such charge at his door; but there had been a lifelong disregard of the traditional wisdom of the rural community, sometimes breaking into fiery contempt of its prudential philosophy and its toilsome surrender to the hardest conditions of its life. These men had never rebelled against the stubborn soil that seemed to bear nothing graciously, after the manner of Nature in kindlier climes, but had to be beaten and broken into fertility. There was no fellowship between them and their surroundings; there was rather an unbroken conflict; Nature must master them or they must master Nature, and they never

stopped work to discuss the question of alternatives. They had conquered, and in the conquest they found the only evidence of successful living of which they took knowledge. John Foster scorned both the process and the result; he would live open-handed and open-hearted with Nature come what might, and this was the chief cause of his offending. "'Pears like as if he had n't cum out so bad after all," was old Mr. Ferguson's comment as he returned to his neighbours in the hall, awkwardly holding his rarely worn, old-fashioned silk hat in his hand; and this seemed to be the general opinion, with an undercurrent of unexpressed

dissent from the verdict which John Foster had taken the liberty, with the mighty aid of death, to pronounce on his own life in defiance of the judgment of those who thought they knew him best.

Out of doors there was a winning softness in the air, like a gentle repentance for months of climatic wrongdoing; winter still lingered, but there were signs that its icy hands were loosening their grip on the streams and fields. In that remote and hilly country spring is always a late comer, and it was an intangible touch of colour in the sky and an intangible touch of softness in the atmosphere that betokened its coming at North Hill.

The near hills were still white, save the bare summits, from which the fierce winds had swept the snow. In the distance the circle of great peaks were shining as in mid-winter, and the bold outlines of the mountain that rose solitary in the far North cut sharply into the blue.



II

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

II

NATURE is not often so companionable to the higher moods, so indifferent to the lower needs, as in this noble country, where the land shapes itself into such sublime pictures and yields so reluctantly its modicum of grain. It was John Foster's fate to be alone in his fellowship with Nature, while all his neighbours were fighting the stubborn fields inch by inch. It was enough for him that such ministration was made to his spirit; he was glad that Nature did not serve

his body too carefully; he accepted the hard fare and forgot it, as the poor student forgets his poverty when he finds himself at last within reach of the books of which he has dreamed. John Foster could not remember a time when the clustering hills and the remote and solitary mountains had not been friendly to him; they had gathered round his childhood as the stars had brooded over it, and both had bidden him welcome and made him feel at home with them. The little farmhouse stood on the ridge of the uplands, and on either hand the surrounding country lay spread out like a map to the far horizons. To the north and west there were

long, irregular processions of hills, sweeping away in sublime disorder to join their leader in the far North; to the south and east a rolling country was divided by rivers and dotted with villages. Few travellers crossed the hill to the village that lay a mile and more beyond, and for the most part John's childhood was as solitary as if it had been cast on an island in mid-seas. But the boy never knew what loneliness was. The deserted road, the rugged hillsides, the woodlands, were populous with life; he knew all their ways and had mastered all their secrets. When daisies were afield he was more active, but frozen rivulets and drifts of

snow found him hardly less happy. The deepest truths often lie sleeping in the heart of a child long before he knows of their presence or understands what they say to him. He has subtle perceptions of the world about him which seem wholly of the senses, but which register the first delicate contacts of his spirit with Nature. Nothing seems quite real to him, or at least not quite complete, because everything hints at something more wonderful and magical which is to come. There were days when John haunted the woods and waited breathless for something to happen. What he expected he could not have described; he did

not know; he only knew that the air was full of whispers; that all manner of secrets were being exchanged; that there seemed to be a mysterious understanding between the trees, the birds, the winds, and the clouds, from which he was excluded; not because there was any desire to shut him out, but because it was impossible to make him understand.

John felt himself on the most friendly footing with this magical world, but the thinnest of veils seemed to envelop him and make clear sight impossible. He had a teasing sense of having his hand on the latch, but not being able to open the door. This dimness of

vision often gave the things which surrounded him a touch of unreality; to him as to the Prince in Tennyson's charming poem:

On a sudden in the midst of men and day,
And while I walk'd and talk'd as heretofore,
I seem'd to move among a world of ghosts,
And feel myself the shadow of a dream.

The boy's imagination was beginning to play its magical tricks with his vision, and the most solid things took on a dreamlike vagueness, and the most unsubstantial became solid realities. The world was the more beguiling to him because it surrounded him with mysteries instead

of revealing sharp outlines and hard realities. It was a wonder world, as it is to every imaginative child; and he went through it with eager step, expecting every moment to surprise its hidden life by sudden and complete discovery. The stretches of forest, the meadows, the hills, the quiet places in the heart of the woods, the stars moving in sublime procession past his window, the glowing of the day and its fading: these things touched his spirit with influences so fine and sensitive that they fashioned him without awakening him out of the dream of childhood. Of this companionship with the wild things of the wood and the bright things of the sky he

never spoke; he could hardly have put his thoughts about them into language; in truth, he did not think about them; he lived in them.

III

It was a fresh and glorious world,
A banner bright that was unfurled
Before me suddenly:
I looked upon those hills and plains,
And seemed as if let loose from chains,
To live at liberty.

III

THERE was another life which was as plain and straight as the old road which ran in front of the house; he knew what it had for him to do and he did it; it never once occurred to him to try to escape from it. He seemed born as much a part of it as of the other world of which he never spoke. The life of this tangible world began very early in the morning and ended when the light faded; and it was filled with all manner of things to be done; that miscellaneous work

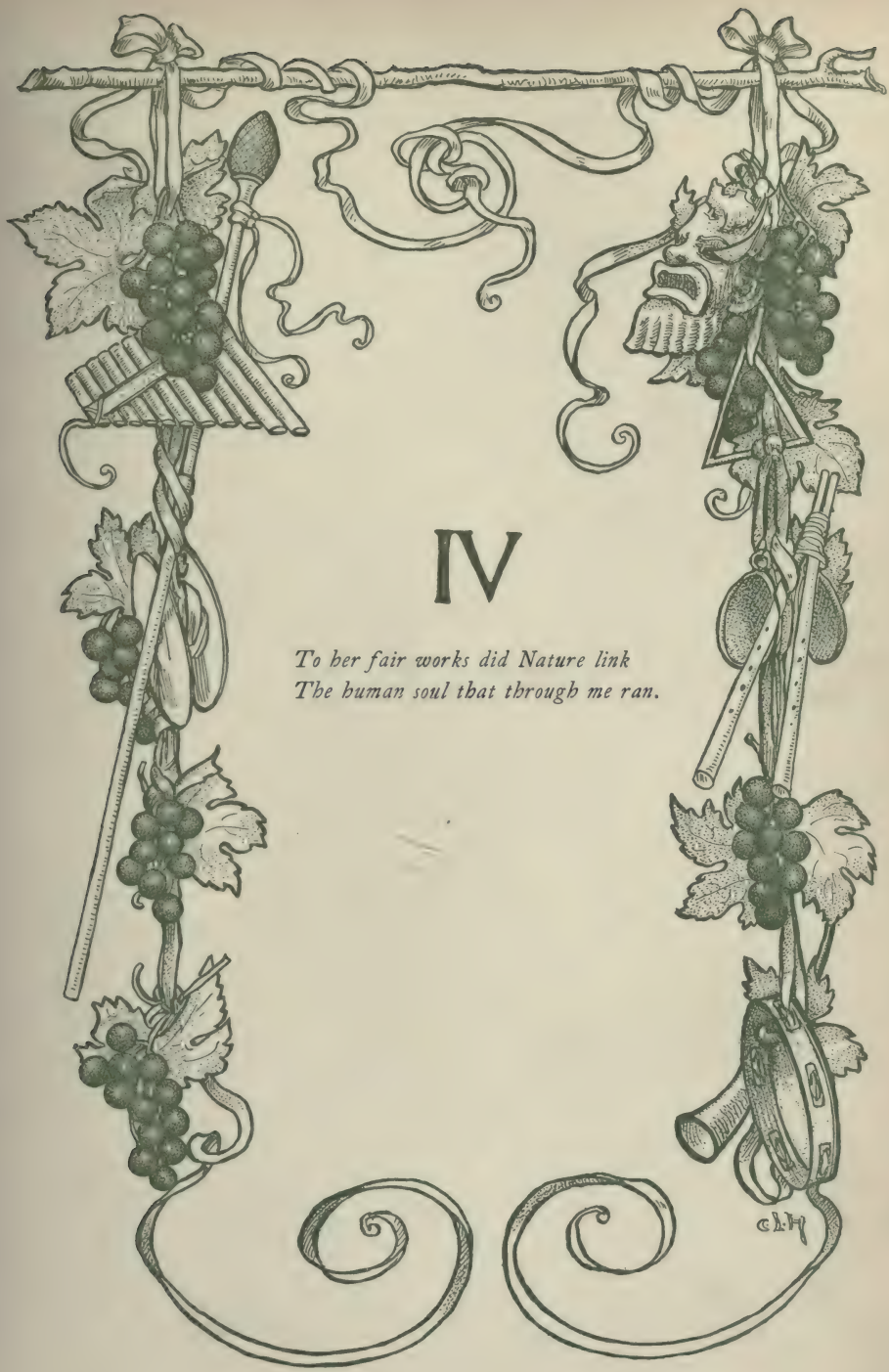
which falls to a boy on a farm. Whenever his feet could save the feet of a man, his feet made the journey to the mill or the blacksmith's forge or the country store; whenever his hands could save a man's hands, his hands did the work. He was at everybody's beck and call; and he knew no higher wisdom than to serve every one as he could. Unconsciously he was grounding himself in reality at the very moment when reality was beginning to have secondary meanings for him.

His surroundings were plain to the point of bareness; for the farm was niggardly in disposition; the house was full of children; there were so

many bodies to be fed and clothed that there was little left for the nurture and furnishing of the mind. There was no touch of romance in the work or the home; there were few books to read, and these, with a single exception, had nothing to say to the boy who had found that another and a finer crop could be taken off the farm, if one knew how to harvest it. There was little in common between the world in which the boy worked and the world in which he lived. He passed through the first in a kind of dream, doing with mechanical fidelity what was set as his task; in the second he was alert, eager, expectant, as if a moment's inattention might cost

him something on which his heart was set. Nobody could find fault with him, but nobody predicted success of any kind for him; he seemed like one of that vast company who serve the world in silence and, having had not such wages as they earned, but as the world chose to give them, quietly vanish and are seen no more. If the boy had ambitions, he never spoke of them; when a day's work was done he passed on as if he never expected to gain anything from it; of the future he seemed to have no thought; he paid for the right to live, and having settled his account with the actual, escaped at once into the world where his heart was.

His body was often at work while his mind was at play ; for birds sang over the meadows as he did his chores, and over the harvest field there was always the arch of the sky, with room enough for a boy's soul to range in and a boy's heart to make its home.



IV

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran.

IV

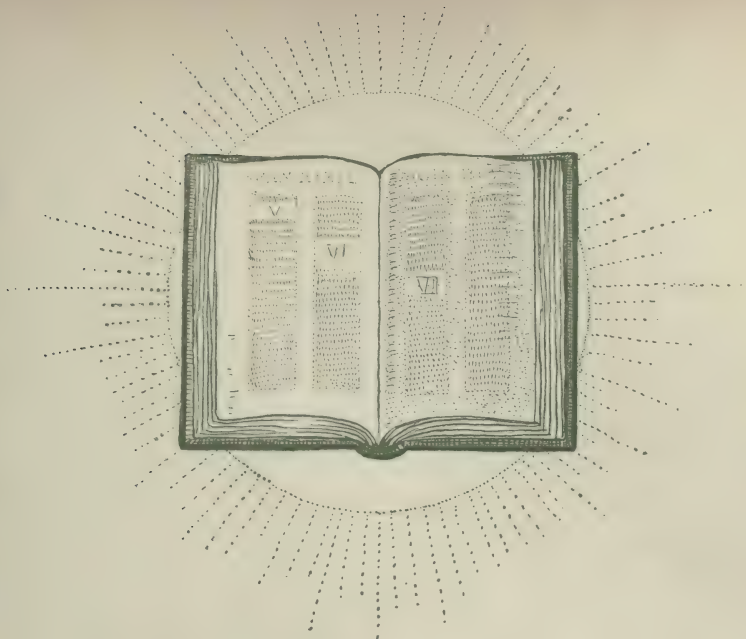
HOWEVER silent and uninterested he might be on the farm, he was alive to the tips of his fingers in the woods. The moment he crossed the invisible boundary into the territory of Nature he awoke as if out of sleep; his face was full of expectancy; his eyes were everywhere; his body seemed to be instinct with intelligence, so alert was his attitude and so quick were his movements. All his senses, in their intentness, combined to develop a sixth and higher sense, compounded of sight, hear-

ing, touch, smell, taste; which in some mysterious way seemed to mingle the life of the body and of the spirit into one indivisible, unconscious, throbbing life; he lived not on the surface of the world, where a thousand beautiful appearances flashed upon his vision and then vanished, but in the deep, flowing, invisible life of Nature. Like the older myth-makers, he was caught up in the universal movement of things and borne aloft into ecstasies of vision. If he had understood his own emotions or been able to give them speech, he would have fashioned out of his dreams and the deep joys of his spirit a figure as elusive, as spon-

taneous, as mysterious as Dionysus; in whom was embodied not only the ripe glow of the wine, but the freedom, the spontaneity, the leaping vitality, the power of abandon, the radiant genius of the liberated imagination. All these things were in his heart, slowly and dumbly rising into his mind.

Those who saw him saw none of these things; they saw a shy New England boy, quiet, silent, intent mainly on keeping out of the way. There was a dawning nobility in the depth of the eye, the purity of the brow, the moulding of the head; but only those who were looking for the signs of greatness discerned these hints and fore-

shadowings. In the making of a poet Nature is so secretive that few discover her purpose until it is accomplished. She hides her interpreters from recognition by their fellows until she has so confirmed them in the habit of vision that neither neglect nor applause can deflect or betray them.

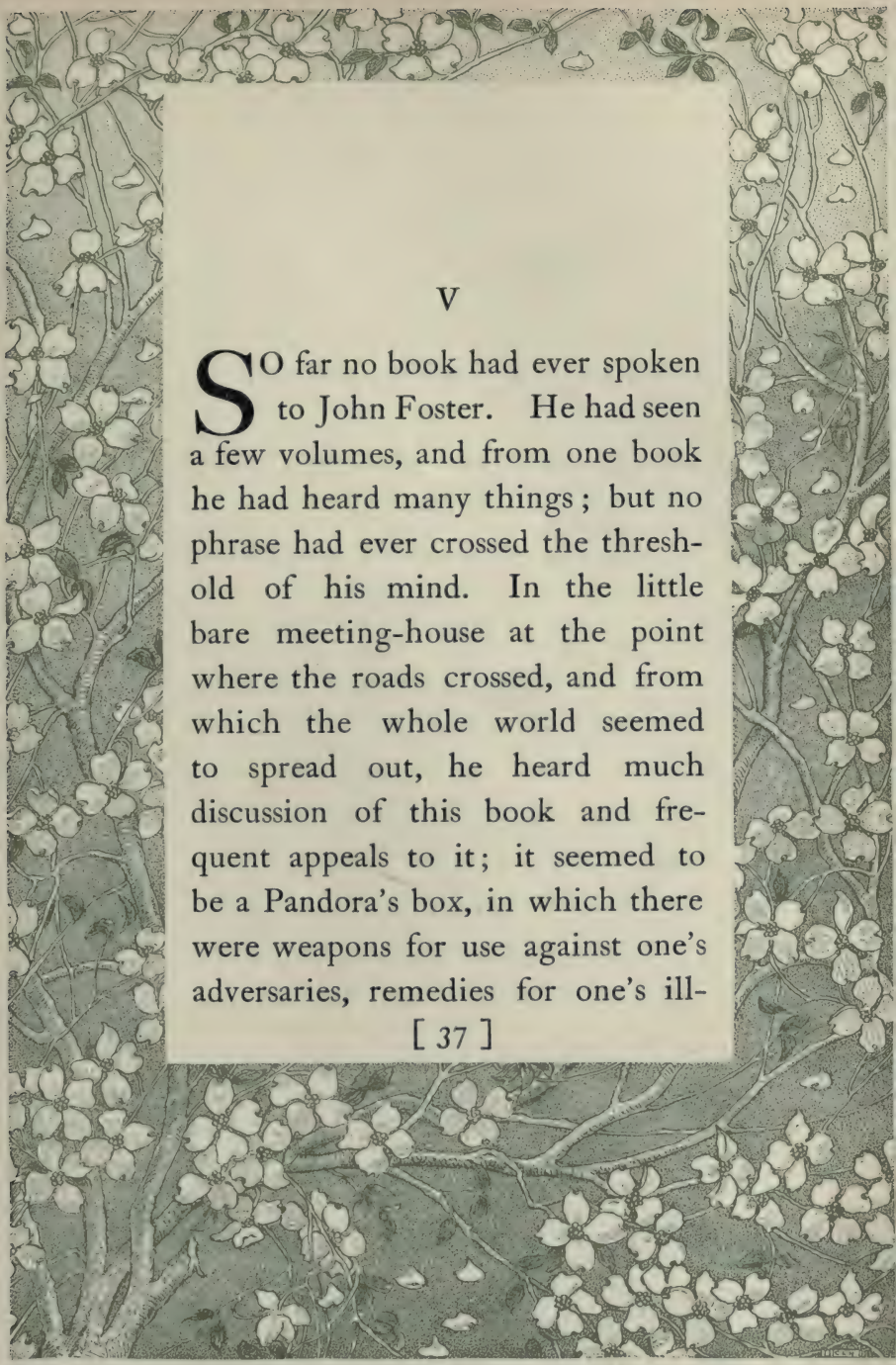


V

And hark! how blithe the Throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let nature be your teacher.

She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless —
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.



V

SO far no book had ever spoken to John Foster. He had seen a few volumes, and from one book he had heard many things; but no phrase had ever crossed the threshold of his mind. In the little bare meeting-house at the point where the roads crossed, and from which the whole world seemed to spread out, he heard much discussion of this book and frequent appeals to it; it seemed to be a Pandora's box, in which there were weapons for use against one's adversaries, remedies for one's ill-

nesses, scourges for one's sins, rewards for one's virtues, and a plan of things which was taken apart and put together again, like a vast and uninteresting puzzle. Sometimes out of all this confusion of sounds a word, a sentence, a picture, an incident suddenly came to life and glowed for a moment and caught the boy with a thrill so intense that it was a pain; and then the fog of an unknown language drifted in, and the glimpse of something human and beautiful vanished. The atmosphere was lifeless, cold and grey; some vast system of magic, remote, lying far apart from anything he knew or felt, seemed to hold possession of the little meet-

ing-house, as bare, hard, untouched by sun and cloud and song and fragrance as the rigid lines of the building. Everything was out of key with Nature; the largeness, the rushing life, the vast fertility, the immeasurable beauty, included everything except the stern, ugly little structure, that seemed not only to defy the elements, but to scorn the loveliness and to set the teeming forces of Nature at defiance.

In winter the boy looked at the bit of sky which showed through the tiny window above the pulpit like a little background of heaven behind an immense expanse of artificial religious landscape of very

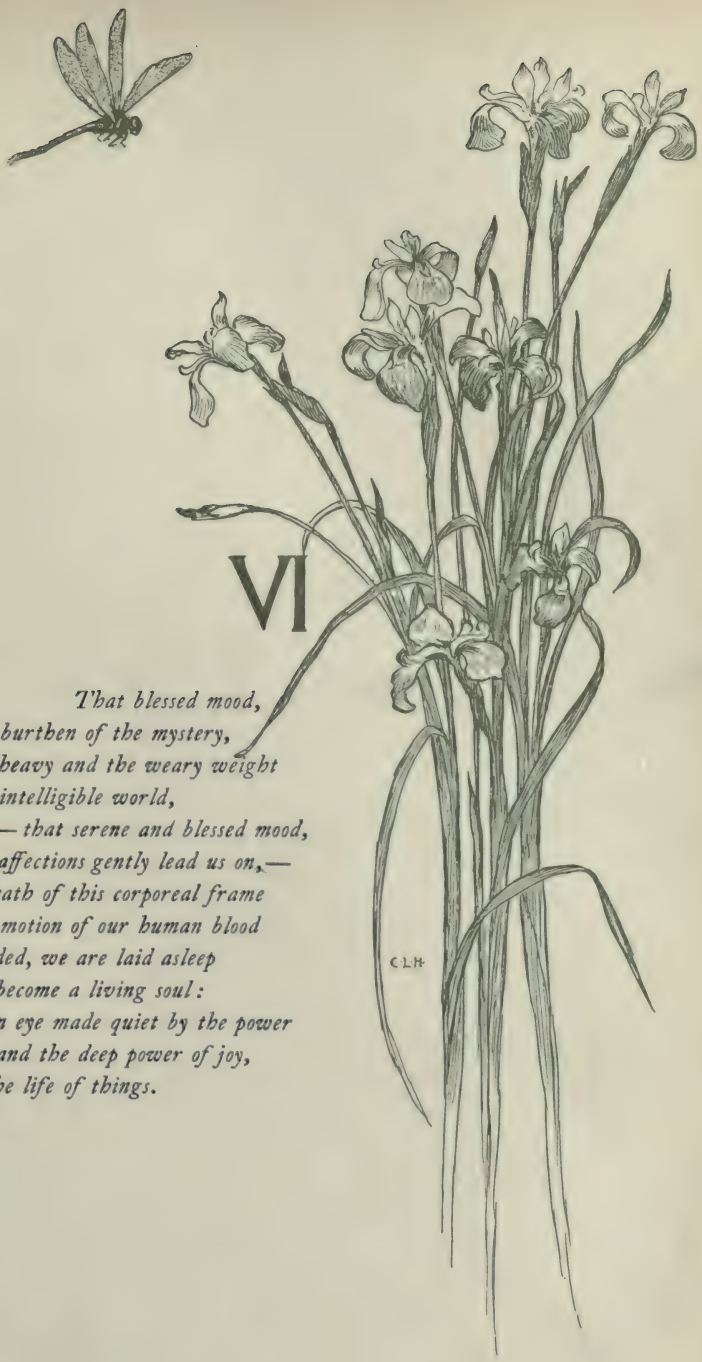
human making, or listened with the inward ear to the faint, far murmur of waters in the mountain brooks; in summer, when the windows were open, he seemed to hear all manner of sounds beating against the walls, as if Nature were trying to break down the barriers and flood the place with light and warmth.

It was a great puzzle to the boy — this strange severance of the bare little building from the world which was so vast and beautiful, this unnatural divorce of the things he heard from the things he knew and felt. One Sunday, while he was still a child and this mystery perplexed and distressed him, a strange hand opened the book and

a strange voice read from it. The voice had in it the magic of feeling and of insight; and as it retold one of those old, familiar stories which hold the mystery of life and are deeper than any sounding of plummet, suddenly the book came to life and the walls seemed to dissolve, and with a great rush of fragrance, caught up from fields and woods, Nature swept into the room. If there had been the stir of angels' wings in the place it could not have been holier than it became from that hour; for the harmony once heard was never lost again.

When the boy went home he carried the book into the woods, and there it sang to him strange, deep

harmonies of the stars, with great shoutings of the seas and music of birds, and all the sweet, familiar melody of the fields; and in this shining world of stars and seas and birds and waving grain, which he knew so well, he saw strange sights of men moving as in great dreams or caught up in great storms and swept like leaves hither and thither; and his heart was heavy with the burden of the mystery of life and sore with its sorrows; and the veil was lifted from his eyes, and he saw men as well as Nature; not with clear sight, but in part with his eyes and in part with his imagination.



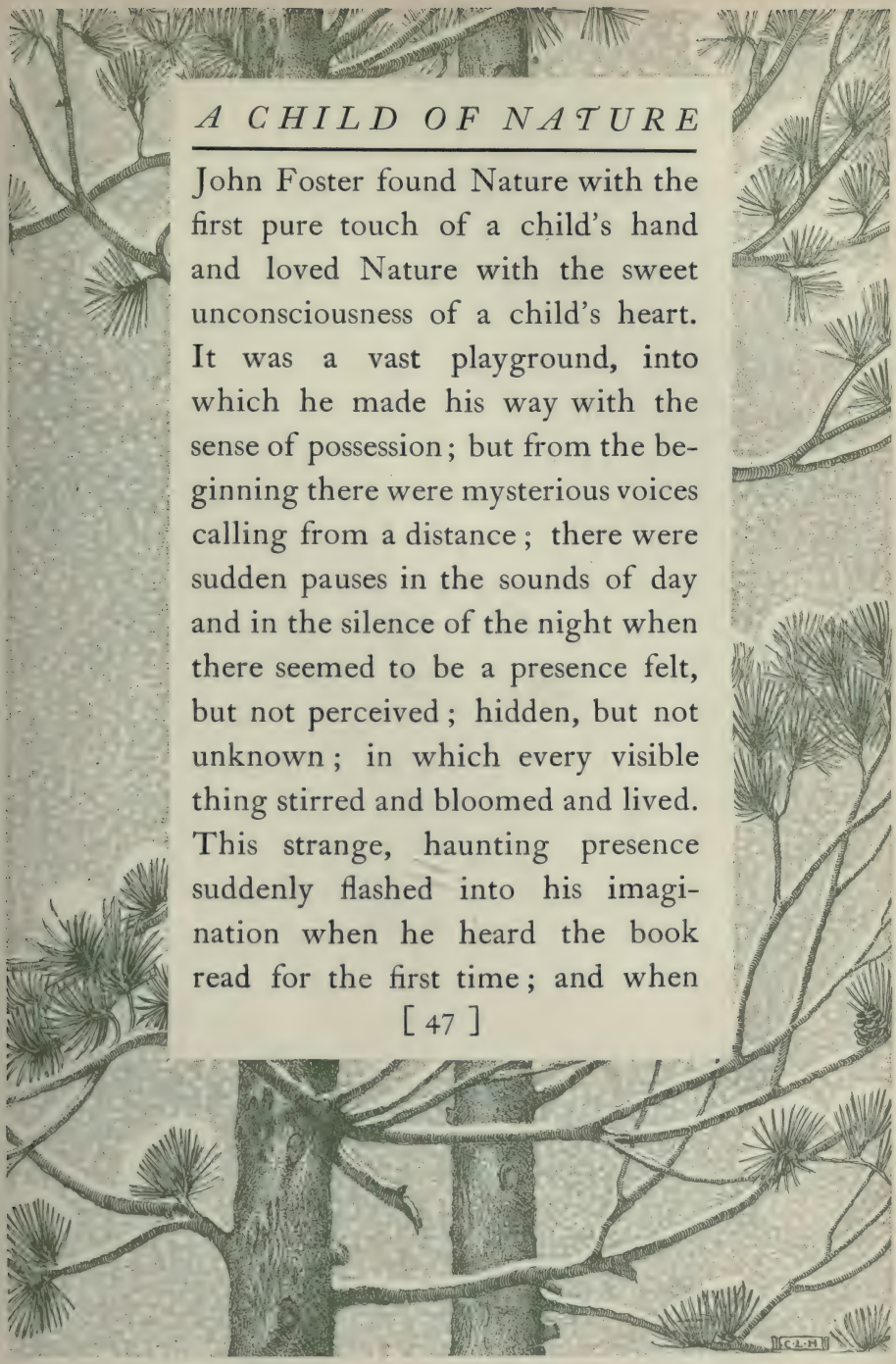
VI

That blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: — that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

VI

THERE are three great discoveries in a boy's life: the discovery of Nature, the discovery of Man, and the discovery of God. No man passes through life without getting glimpses of all these mysterious realities, but there are few to whom these determining facts in experience stand out with equal clearness. Some have the vision of God, and are so transported by it that Nature remains almost unnoted and men are seen dimly and in a dream, like trees walking. Some are so enam-

oured with the beauty of the world and so penetrated by its vitality that, like the fauns and dryads, they are bound to the woods and fields and shun the homes and haunts of men, singing strange melodies, in which vibrate the undertones of a life hidden and obscure in glens and deep woods; and others are so caught up in the movement of human life and so passionately sympathetic with it that they have no heart for the joy of the world and no silent rapture for the vision of God. To each man, according to his nature, the mystery shows itself; and they are few and great in whose imagination all the lines of light meet and blend in perfect revelation.



A CHILD OF NATURE

John Foster found Nature with the first pure touch of a child's hand and loved Nature with the sweet unconsciousness of a child's heart. It was a vast playground, into which he made his way with the sense of possession; but from the beginning there were mysterious voices calling from a distance; there were sudden pauses in the sounds of day and in the silence of the night when there seemed to be a presence felt, but not perceived; hidden, but not unknown; in which every visible thing stirred and bloomed and lived. This strange, haunting presence suddenly flashed into his imagination when he heard the book read for the first time; and when

he carried it away into the heart of the woods and let the light of the open sky fall on it, and heard the birds singing over him as they sang in the pages of the book, and the faint rustle of grain borne to him on the soft air as it rises into sound and subsides into silence again in the record of the book, he knew that between the beauty and truth in Nature and the beauty and truth in the book there was neither discord nor severance, but harmony at the root and in the flower of the life that climbs in Nature and finds many voices in the human spirit. And so he discovered the presence and knew that God was in His world.

All this lay deep in the boy's heart, but it was dim in his thought; for the real things of life rise very gradually into consciousness; they are born in experience and slowly ascend out of the deeps where the soul touches the Infinite in the innermost recesses of being. The child plucks the flower with a careless hand and does not know that its roots are deep in the mystery of the universe and that earth and sky meet in its making. It is first a flower to the eye, and then, when its wonderful relationships are understood, it blooms again in the imagination; and it is in this second blooming that art gathers it fresh and fragrant for immortal blossoming.

VII

I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy,
The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;
Of Him who walked in glory and in joy
Following his plough, along the mountain-side:
By our own spirits are we deified.

VII

JOHN FOSTER had made two great discoveries without taking note of his journey or waking out of the dream of childhood. And now his dream began to centre about the bare little schoolhouse, and new figures moved in it. There, as at home, John was silent; he did not hold himself apart, and there was no touch of pride in his detachment; but language failed him; he knew not how to speak of the things in his heart, and other things barely touched him. He had his place in the games, but he

seemed to be taking a part rather than playing; the shouts, the rush, the turmoil, the stir and tumult of recess and holidays never penetrated the quiet places where he lived. The text-books were faithfully studied, but they left him cold; their speech was not his, nor did the things they taught mean anything to him. It seemed to be the way of the world to know these things, and so he learned them; but they neither liberated nor inspired him. Various masters, competent and incompetent, sat behind the little table with its row of dull books, but the real teacher never came that way, and the boy's spirit remained untouched. There were a

few books in the little library of the school, mostly of the kind that are born dead; but there were also a few that lived, and it chanced that one of these books came into the boy's hand and thence into his pocket, and was carried afield the next day. He knew nothing of its origin, of the man whose heart was in it, of the spiritual conditions which helped to fashion and were reflected in it. It was to him simply paper with black marks upon it. Stretched out at the foot of a great tree, with the murmurous music of the forest gently touched by the wind above him, he opened the book indifferently and without expectation, when suddenly, like a

flash of light, a phrase seemed to leap out of the book into his imagination. It was a line from Burns; one of those fine simplicities of speech in which a deep thought lies like a star in a mountain pool. In that moment the boy knew without knowing what art is and means; he caught a glimpse of that perfection in which spirit and form dwell together in immortal harmony; truth and beauty bearing a new flower on the ancient stem of time. There was magic in the line; the earth suddenly shone with new meanings; the boy's heart danced with inward glee; it seemed as if he must break away from bonds of time and place

into some unrealised liberty; some boundless freedom wide enough for his soul to run at large in. The glow of that hour lasted long, and as fast as it began to fade was renewed by the touch of another poet; for the boy had found his way to the singers, and the world was flooded with music. He walked on air in the ecstasy of those first days of fellowship with the seers, the thinkers, and the poets. The fields about him seemed to spread to the horizon as he ran, and they were swept by gusts of fragrance from the immortal fields where the vanished singers chant beyond the touch of care and time; the woods were haunted with half-seen forms

which the world had long banished and forgotten, won back to their ancient haunts by the boy's faith and vision; and the stars, as he walked the lonely road at night, were like swinging lamps set along some great highway where the immortals pass in majestic procession. The touch of the imagination lay on the whole earth like a light which brings all hidden, obscure, and mysterious things to view. The boy was walking by the light which has shone on the path of every poet since time began. The power to create was not to be his, but he lived in the creative mood; the wonders were all revealed to him, the joy was in his heart, the rap-

ture in his eye; for a new heaven and new earth were born in his imagination, and the morning stars sang again the great song of beginnings.

VIII

And, when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

VIII

THE poets sit beside the tree of life, and one cannot learn their songs without learning also the sorrow and joy, the strife and peace, the work and rest, the hate and love, the loss and gain which make up the human story.

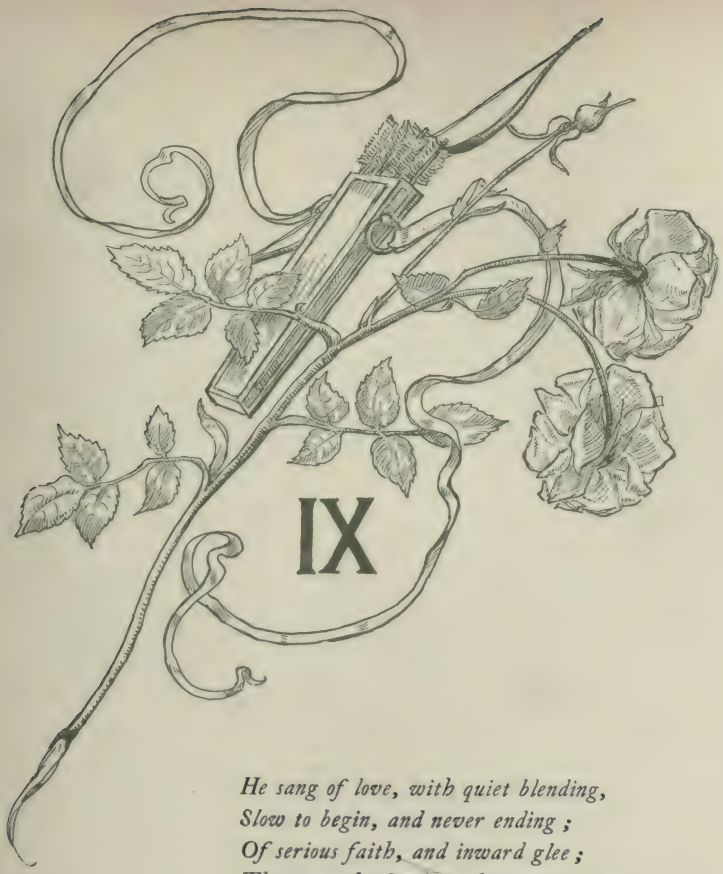
In the lonely countryside the solitary boy entered into the rich experience of the race; committed its crimes, fought its battles, suffered its defeats, was bruised by its sorrows, and borne aloft on the strong wings of its great aspirations. He looked into the

heart of the past through eyes that had the searching insight of genius behind them. The passion of the race, which has borne so many great spirits on mounting waves of power and dragged so many down to the very gates of hell, encompassed him, and he understood for the first time what tremendous forces contend with man in the making of that personality which in turn makes destiny. Among all those who saw John Foster in those days no one knew what was moving within him, least of all they of his own household; for youth is a mystery save to the poets; and its rapture, its passion, its dreaming of the time that is to

be — the madness and the gladness in the foaming cup which life holds to its lips — pass unnoted by those who live under the same roof.

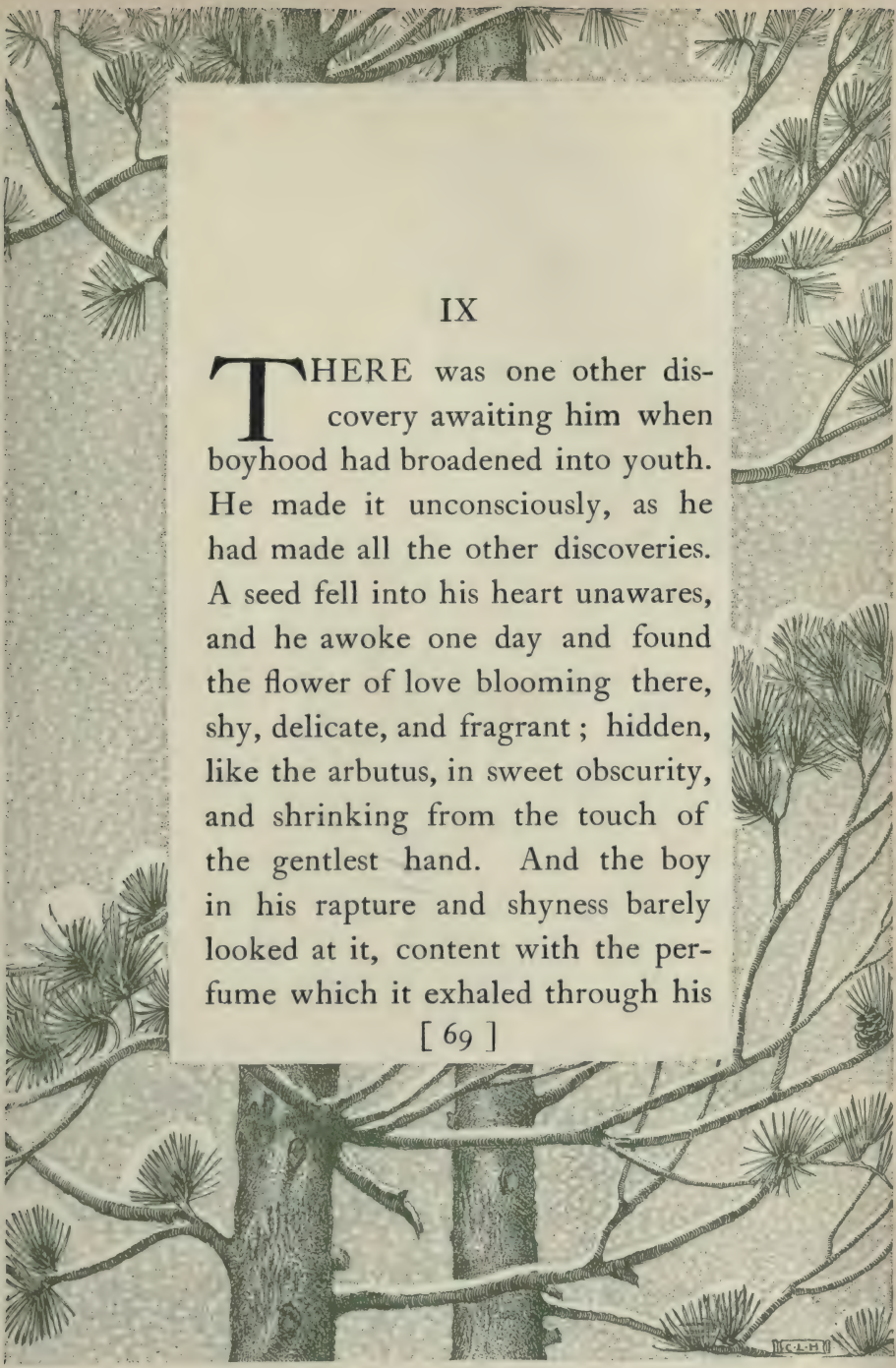
In silence and solitude the soul comes to its own ; in silence and solitude it passes through the ultimate gate into the final mystery. But there was no sense of loneliness in the boy's life in those days when he was discovering what is in men, and striving to find how this knowledge was one with the knowledge of Nature and of God. He was swept out himself by the tides of emotion, impulse and vitality from the Infinite which flowed in upon him as the sea comes sweeping in upon the land.

He lacked near companionship, but he was making friends with humanity, and Nature was finding place and speech for him.



IX

He sang of love, with quiet blending,
Slow to begin, and never ending;
Of serious faith, and inward glee;
That was the Song — the Song for me!



IX

THERE was one other discovery awaiting him when boyhood had broadened into youth. He made it unconsciously, as he had made all the other discoveries. A seed fell into his heart unawares, and he awoke one day and found the flower of love blooming there, shy, delicate, and fragrant; hidden, like the arbutus, in sweet obscurity, and shrinking from the touch of the gentlest hand. And the boy in his rapture and shyness barely looked at it, content with the perfume which it exhaled through his

whole being. On the instant he understood many things which the poets had told him in a language he had not learned. He was a born lover, being of a pure mind and a rich imagination; and he wore the crown of life in silent blissfulness. He could not have spoken if he would, for speech was denied him; but his nature was atune and, like a sensitive harp, vibrated at every touch of the unseen fingers. She played upon him and did not hear the music. Born to feel and to know rather than to speak and to act, for him love meant not passion, but surrender. He gave everything, and the great law was worked out in him; for he regained what he

had given, increased a thousandfold. There was a shrine in his soul and there was perpetual adoration there, and he became like the beautiful soul he worshipped; slowly transformed by the creative power of that divine passion of which religion and art and service are the witnesses, and from which all holy and perfect and beautiful thoughts, words, deeds, and works are born.

The tumult barely touched his senses, but set the imagination aflame. The sensitive face of the New England girl caught the glow of the morning, in which for the first time the young man, passing swiftly out of boyhood, saw the great world shining in the order

and beauty of immortal love. Every common thing turned to gold in that light; every impure thought vanished, for Una was passing that way. In the depths of his heart there were stirrings of deep human feelings which knit him to his fellows in the silent brotherhood of universal experience. To love one human soul is to have the capacity to love all; and through a great affection for the friend at his side a man reaches out and touches hands with his remotest human kin. The miracle of love, which turns human clay into the semblance and shape of divinity, once wrought in a man's heart ripens swiftly or slowly into infinite compassion and the capacity

for sacrifice. It was not in John Foster's nature to round out experience by expression or action; he was born to see, to think, and to feel, but not to speak or act. The depths of his soul were moved, but the trembling of the waters was unseen and inaudible. The love which filled his soul was as pure as the fragrance of a flower or of the unstained sky; but lacking the kindling touch of passion, to which the harp of life vibrates into the most enchanting music, it remained a song without words; one of those unheard melodies of which the audible music of the world is but an echo. The wonder-working stirring of the imagination when the senses are aglow,

which renews in every generation the creative mood and brings back the creative moment, was denied him ; but all that love means short of its ultimate surrender and its final fruition he knew. Its purity, devotion, exaltation, were his ; its translation out of the isolation of rapture into the deeper joy of perfect companionship in days and works, in the visions and tasks which are appointed to all those who would make the journey of life to the very end, he did and could not know. He was a worshipper from afar ; and the goddess passed his way without knowing that he had looked and seen and loved.

X

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,
Think not of any severing of our loves!
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;
I only have relinquished one delight
To live beneath your more habitual sway.

X

A LIFE that silently expands through vision and thought and is undisturbed by the tumult of action keeps no reckoning of time; for the days define themselves sharply in the consciousness of those only whose tasks are set for special reasons and whose work is assigned by the clock. John Foster's life was so essentially subjective that the divisions of time made for toilers of the hour had no existence for him; days and years flowed past him in one unbroken current, the shadows of the trees cooling the

quiet waters in summer and the stars moving with them in winter. As time went on the early reserve deepened and the early silence was more rarely broken. It was not the life of a recluse who wished to escape from his fellows; it was rather the life of a man who was denied the gift of speech. The gentleness of the face, the kindliness of the eyes, the habitual care for others, showed the fellowship of this reticent soul with those to whom he was bound by ties of kinship or of neighbourhood. The work on the farm was never intermitted; there were no journeys beyond the mountains; for while the man's thoughts wandered far, his

feet never strayed outside the limits of the great uplands on which he was born. Changes came, as they will come alike to those who sit at the fireside and to those who travel. One after another the children who grew up under the roof sought the larger opportunities of more active communities; the family shrunk until John alone of the younger generation remained. Then the father and mother died; there were brief home-comings, when the elders were carried beyond the familiar walls into the wide friendliness of the fields; and then the house became silent again, and John was left to that seclusion which for him meant the richest companionship.

The farm was looked after, but it was a secondary interest; the silent man loved his bit of the landscape more than he loved the crops it bore. Idealist as he was to the very heart, he was saved from material disaster by habits of industry and thrift, which, as in many another case, kept the flower of the spirit well shielded from keen winds and bitter frosts.

The splendour slowly softened, as youth vanished, into a tender beauty which touched the heart of the man as the earlier glory had touched his imagination. Thoughts too deep either for laughter or for tears kept company with him at work in his fields or at rest in the woods.

It seemed to him as if the splendour which once lay on the surface of the world had not vanished, but silently sunk into the heart of things and radiated thence in a beauty more tender and pervading. He learned the artist's secret of finding and keeping all things fresh to his eye and imagination; as the glow of youth faded he found the departing loveliness reappearing in the form and shape and meaning of common things; thus gradually exchanging sight, which may grow dim, for vision which becomes clearer and more direct as the years go by. So he kept the fairyland of his early dreams at his doorstep, and translated the great speech of the poets

into his own homely, every-day utterance. He had mastered the art of life; for he had learned that the purest idealism may be kept untarnished in daily dealing with homely cares and common work. When the first kindling glow of the senses began to fail he held aloft the steady light of the imagination, and for him the world never ceased to glow and bloom and ripen in the large purpose of God. This discovery kept him in touch with Spenser and Shakespeare and Keats; and he found with Emerson that wherever a man stands the whole arch of the sky is over him.

John Foster, in his passion for the stars, did not trip and fall to the

ground over common duties; he kept his footing amid homely cares and in familiar relations, and so his vision remained undimmed. His neighbours knew him to be kindly and simple and industrious; they thought him lacking in ambition; he cared little for new methods and his talk about the staple topics of a farming community was of the briefest. From the standpoint of local opinion he was trustworthy and industrious, but he was not successful. To his hard-handed and hard-headed neighbours he was an amiable ne'er-do-weel; a man of good principles who could not get on in life. They judged him entirely from the standpoint of farm

management, and he was a very indifferent farmer.

If he knew the neighbourhood opinion he was not oppressed by it. His life was so entirely the unfolding of the inward spirit, his standards were so far above local ideals, his manner of life was so individual, that without being self-centred he was independent of his surroundings; he was a rustic whose occupations were of the farm, but whose interests were of the world. It is wise to know neighbourhood opinion and to regard it for correction, admonition, and reproof; but he who would possess his own soul must live outside his neighbourhood. It was precisely at this point that

the indifferent farmer parted company with neighbours; they had only the vocation of the hands; he had also the avocation of the spirit.

XI

The Clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won,
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

XI

IN his later years he found a new source of companionship. Denied the gift of speech, by which men not only carry their thought outside their own personalities by giving it ultimate form, but keep the record of their own experience, and thus continually reinforce the creative energy of personality, Foster might have led an existence only half realised in thought. From this half-life, which never passes out of subjective moods and feelings, and, like a subterranean stream, never runs clear in the light, he was

saved by the discovery that if he could not give his thought full flow and volume, he could at least keep a record of it; a kind of tally of experience. In these years of searching observation, of deep reading, of quiet meditation, the world had gradually become clear to his imagination in its vast and infinitely diversified life. As a student he had lived in many ages, explored many countries, seen many cities, heard many languages, and penetrated many experiences; as a lover of Nature he had learned many secrets of woods and fields and changing skies; as a sensitive, responsive, meditative man he had come to know life deeply and with sanity

of insight. What other men would have called a philosophy or general scheme of things was to him simply knowledge of life borne in from many sources, gained far more by the very commonplace process of living than by any unusual process of thinking, distilled by time out of the rich substance of experience. Slowly but steadily the great order of the world revealed itself to him, and he found his own place in it; as he touched it at many points in ever-deepening harmony of relationship his nature was fertilised; for whenever a man touches that order which is the hem of the garment of God, vitality passes into him. Patiently and reverently wait-

ing upon God, he was enriched and inspired with glimpses of truth, insights into life, visions of beauty. The cares of the world did not wait by his door when he passed out of his home into the wide domain of Nature; the tumult of the world did not drown the delicate melodies which float over sun-swept fields or are borne on summer airs through the unthronged paths of the woods; the work of the world did not exhaust and benumb the responsive power of his spirit when mysterious influences, rising like exhalations out of the pure deeps of his nature, touched him like chords of faint melody and set his spirit vibrating with the divine harmony at the

heart of things. He was free; he was sane; he had silence, solitude, and the pure heart; and the world spoke to him: these are always the simple annals of the seers and poets. This continual flowering of thought in his mind came at last to have a record; for he formed a habit of keeping a register of his thoughts. It was a skeleton report; a bare outline; for some defect in his nature kept him from any approach to free expression. He was content to make signs; to keep a few brief data; a running account of the things he saw, heard, felt, and thought. As he grew older this history of his spirit grew, not fuller, but more exact and definite; it was

made up of slight but well-defined tracings of his course through the mysterious world of his journeying. If the little note-books in which this record was kept had fallen into the hands of an unimaginative man, they would have seemed but a confusion of abrupt and incomplete phrases; a man of insight, finding the key to their revelations, would have seen in them the stuff of which wonder-books are made; the star dust of great truths, the pollen of the imperishable flowering of imagination, the seeds of brave deeds; such gathering of treasure, in a word, as befalls the man who travels through a universe alight with the splendour of God and

throbbing with His measureless life. It was the stuff of immortal life which found its way through Foster's rich but silent personality into this record of his experience; it was the stuff, therefore, of which literature is made. For literature is not fashioned out of hand; its substance is secreted slowly and silently in the depths of the spirit out of all its passions, sorrows, toils, cares, and works, with flashing of stars sinking unawares into its heart, and great swelling harmonies bearing it onward in those infrequent ecstasies which sometimes lift it above itself. In simplicity and sincerity, with no thought of the reading of other eyes, as genuinely and

quietly as he lived, John Foster kept the record of his soul. And when he died it lay in his desk with the much-worn books in which for years he had kept his accounts with the seedsman and storekeeper. And there, side by side, through the months when the old house was tenantless lay these two records of a man's history as the owner of a few acres and the possessor also of that sublime landscape which is the foreground of man's immortality.

XII

Thy thoughts and feelings shall not die,
Nor leave thee, when gray hairs are nigh,
A melancholy slave;
But an old age serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave.

XII

APRIL slowly drifted over the mountain skies into May, and May, touched with the first delicate bloom of the tender Northern summer, ripened into June, and life crept to the door of the old house where John Foster had always met it with a smile, and climbed to the windows, and budded and bloomed in the old garden, where a few familiar and friendly flowers had always lived on intimate terms with the silent man; but there was no response to the beauty which enfolded the deserted

house. The hand of Nature was on the latch, but the door remained shut. If one who had known the love of the man for this radiant and fragrant world and the caressing gentleness of that world, had taken thought of the circumstances, it would have seemed as if Nature missed a familiar presence and were feeling for it with sensitive tendrils, and striving to recall it with voices that were musical murmurs on the fragrant breath of summer. The wide landscape softened, grew tender, stirred with the rising tide of life, and broke at last into verdure and bloom, all the hidden springs of vitality overflowing in green rivulets or rich masses of foliage;

but the house remained silent and tenantless. Seed-time passed into harvest and the ancient miracle was wrought again; but in the unopened house, to which the sun found access only for a few slender beams, the record of Foster's life lay like a seed buried in the ground, beyond the reach of warmth and light.

In October, when the banners of the retreating hosts were flaming on the hills, the closed windows were suddenly opened and the door swung wide for a new tenant. The farmer folk were at their wits' ends to classify him, for his like had never been seen in that country before save in some gay company of

summer sightseers. He was young; there was that air of being on easy terms with the world which can neither be counterfeited nor concealed; his figure, face, bearing, manner, and dress bore unmistakable testimony to largeness of opportunity and ripeness of taste. From the local point of view he was an idler; for he made no show of interest in the farm; and no one saw the trace of any kind of work on hands or face. He was simple, unaffected, and friendly; but he was even more detached from the life of the community than John Foster had been. Foster had never spoken out; he had never acquired the use of speech; the new tenant

of the old house had had access to so many kinds of knowledge, had seen life in so many diverse aspects and in so many places that his individuality had been buried for the time under a mass of unassimilated learning and half-understood experiences. To Foster life had been niggardly in its gifts of outward experience; to Ralph Parkman life had been lavish; the one reached order, clearness, beauty by the unfolding of his own nature; the other was to attain these ultimate ends of living by a rich process of assimilation. To the one had been given the clear vision, the deep conviction, the inward harmony; to the other freedom, fluency, and

beauty of expression. The one lacked words, the other lacked the inward unity of thought and knowledge which charges words with meaning and gives them wings for flight into the highest regions of expression.

There was a touch of genius in Ralph Parkman; that beautiful grace which seems to be the flower of ancestral toil; as if forgotten generations had worked, that presently, as out of a rich soil, one human soul might blossom spontaneously, radiantly, with the divine unconsciousness of the flowers of the field. And conditions had made it easy for the ardent young spirit to bask in the sun and

pluck the fruits by the lifting of the hand which others gain by toil and self-denial and pain. While his fellows were besieging fortune with prayers and offerings and sacrifices she turned on him her indifferent glance, and straightway there was a smile on the face of fate; she ran before him, and the way blossomed with opportunity and pleasure. There was a vein of native vigor in him, or he would have been corrupted; for he was educated without discipline. He had troops of friends; he was the joy of the schools through which he passed with a contagious sweetness of disposition and charm of temperament, the prizes falling to

him by force, apparently, of his own inward attraction. He loved study, art, travel; and he went free-footed and sure-footed through a world which set its choice food and wine before him wherever he chose to tarry. He was thirty years old when he opened the door of John Foster's bare little study, and he had awakened more hopes than gather about most men in the full course of a lifetime. He knew so much, had seen so many things, lived in so many cities, made so many friends, spoke so many languages, and was gifted with such superb vitality and such ease and grace that he seemed capable of all things, and had become a glorious promise.

His had been a golden youth, and now that it was passing from him, Ralph Parkman was becoming aware of the peril of his position. He had given a draft for an unlimited sum on the future; could he meet it when the day of payment came? Everything solicited him, but no voice had spoken to his spirit; he could turn his hand to many things, but no art had laid its deep compulsion on him; he had passed through many fields of knowledge, and his inward life had grown rich by acquisition, but there was no building power in his soul, no divine necessity striving in his heart for place and tool and speech. Many things spoke through

him; but he remained silent. When this knowledge of the disparity between his material and his organising power became clear there was a tumult in his soul which marked the beginning of that crisis which shapes a man's character and determines his fortunes. He was filled with a passionate desire for silence and solitude; for the detachment and isolation in which he might find himself; for he discovered that though he knew hosts of people, he had never met himself face to face. He remembered the noble breadth of the landscape in the mountain region where John Foster lived; he made his way to the little village; he found an un-

occupied house; with a faithful servant and a few books he lighted the fire on the old hearthstone and set himself to search his heart to the bottom, to understand his own spirit and to learn what tool life meant to put into his hand and what work he was to do.

The silence and loneliness of the country oppressed him at first, for he had never been alone before; but the splendour of the autumn touched his imagination as if some great presence, itself unseen, were putting on coronation robes. There were days of such ripeness and harmony of sky and earth and air that it seemed as if Nature were making her vast spaces splendid for the en-

throning of some invisible spirit. In such a radiant calm, with such softness brooding over the fields, and such majesty sleeping on the hills, the stage seemed too noble for the setting of human life, with its few years and its pathetic uncertainties. Ralph's thoughts passed from himself to the beauty of the world, and he began to feel the inward peace which comes with that self-forgetfulness which is the beginning of self-knowledge. Emptied of all egoism, there was room in his spirit for Nature, and Nature brought her repose, her sanity, her deep unconsciousness. It is in such moods that the finer influences search and find us; it is in such moods, when

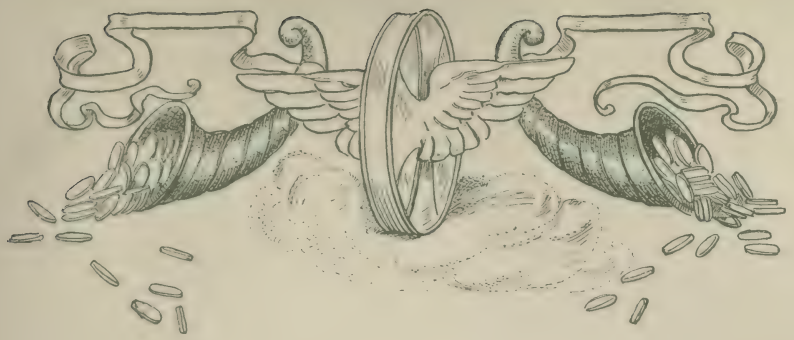
we are not empty and passive, but harmonious with the highest and truest in thought and life, that the great inspirations breathe upon us and the invisible chords yield the music which appeals to us with the warmth and colour and passion of the human and the pure and thrilling intimations of the divine. It may have been a fancy, but in that mood of sensitiveness to the most subtle and delicate influences Ralph felt himself touched and quieted by the air of the house; as if within those bare walls there lingered some spiritual energy which had survived the passing of the mortal frame from which it issued. This may have been fanciful, but the

impression was so persistent and definite that the solitary student sought out those who knew the earlier occupants of the house, and he was not slow to discover that among them all his concern was with the silent man who, within a brief half year, had sat before the same hearth and looked out of the same windows to the hills sweeping in a vast circle to the north and east. Not much was told him, but that little was enough; for the few and hard facts were significant, and there was more in the silence of those who were questioned than in the reports they gave. And Ralph's imagination was quickened as he recalled the

vanished life, and reconstructed the image of the vanished personalty, by the interpretation of the house and garden. The air of the old house, mellowed by the long habit of a man of hidden genius; the simple furnishings, supplemented by the presence of a few books of the kind which illumine the place where they are gathered and reveal the affinities and interests of the spirit to which they have ministered, plied the imagination of the sensitive student who had fallen heir to this rich heritage of simple living and high thinking with subtle but searching hints of a mind to which, in its deep repose, the whole world of spiritual experience had

ministered. Ralph had travelled far and sought truth at the ends of the earth; here had lived and died one to whom truth had come by force of those deep affinities by which the soul reaches out and draws to itself the things which are its own. When the nights lengthened and the world was wrapped in the silence of those vast snowfalls which descend out of hidden skies with a hush that shuts man in with his deepest self by the blazing fire, the spirit of John Foster seemed to pervade the house, as if seeking every inlet into a consciousness akin to its own, and swift to comprehend what all others had been slow to understand. Ralph felt as if a pathetic

appeal were being made from one who had found freedom of utterance after the long silence of a lifetime, but was not quite at rest for longing to speak in the language of those who thought him dumb when his whole nature was aglow with thought and his whole heart aflame with love.



XIII

. . . Thoughts whose very sweetness yieldeth proof
That they were born for immortality.

XIII

IT was in mid-winter — the world afar off and his old life withdrawn and lying like a mist on the horizon — that Ralph came upon the records of Foster's spirit; the faint and disconnected tracings of his inarticulate experience. Broken and fragmentary as they were he swiftly deciphered them; for the key to their meaning was in his mind. He read the loose sheets with an interest which deepened into passionate sympathy and comprehension; he retraced Foster's long journey through the marvel-

lous world which had gradually unfolded about him, noting the broadening outlook, the clarifying vision, the penetrating thought. As he read it seemed as if he were living again in his own experience this hidden life, reaching out in the silence of quiet years for the most far-reaching kinships with the movement of universal thought, and bringing itself into deep and final harmony with the spiritual order. As he penetrated into the secret history of this solitary human soul, sounding its perilous way without companionship across the deeps of life, the image of Foster became more distinct and real and the path he had taken more clear; until the

living was not possessed by, but in possession of, the spirit of the dead. There was no subjugation of personality, no passive surrender to another will; there was complete sympathy and perfect comprehension.

In Parkman's rich but unrationalised experience the story told by Foster's notes was a torch held aloft in a dim treasure-house filled with things of priceless value brought together from the ends of the earth, but lying in confusion, without the illumination of order or light. Its effect upon his unripe intelligence was like the quickening of the sun at the hour when the earth is in a passion of fertility; it brought him

to swift and clear maturity; he knew what was in his own spirit, he discerned the specific meaning of Nature and art and history for him, he comprehended his relations to the complex world about him, and he saw by a lightning flash of intelligence what he was to do and with what tools he was to work. This experience, for a man of his type, was not unusual; sensitive spirits, whose growth is completed by the extension of the imagination to the very limits of knowledge and experience, are always coming into possession of themselves by the interpretation of other and more mature spirits; and acquaintance with creative minds registers our own

self-development. The constant service of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare and their fellows is the liberation which they accomplish in other minds.

That which was peculiar in Parkman's experience and gave it dramatic interest was the resurrection of a buried soul which it effected. Having discerned the spiritual vision, the intellectual richness of Foster's life, it became his first duty to share these lost treasures with a world which is never too opulent in these ultimate forms of wealth. Before he could uncover the springs of his own genius the disciple felt the searching necessity of setting forth the teaching of the master.

It was a work of piety and of joy; there was in the doing of it the same tender and passionate delight which sometimes came to the copyist in the scriptorium of the monastery when, with rich embellishment of trailing vine and blossoming flower, he gave new form to some old scripture; adding nothing which was foreign to the text, but evoking its hidden truth in fair images and fragrant traceries which interpreted to the eye what the mind read in the bare lettering. In like manner, and with a kindred joy, Ralph Parkman wrought the miracle of resurrection on John Foster's detached and unripe thoughts; mere seeds of ideas, hard and bare

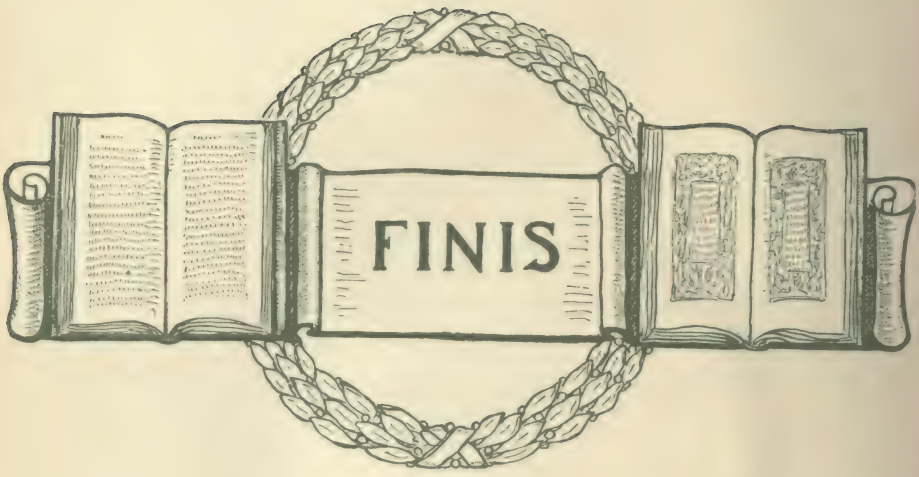
and cold; and yet husbanding all the potentialities of life and beauty in them. Upon this rude text Parkman worked with the loving skill of a monastic scribe; and these dormant seeds, in the warm soil of his imagination, yielded their secret and imperishable vitality.

It was a little book which finally went forth in the early summer from the old house, but it was very deep and beautiful; like a quiet mountain pool, it was far from the dust and tumult of the highways, and there were images of stars in it. With the generosity of a fine spirit, the young man interpreted the life of the older man through the rich atmosphere of his own temperament

and with the clear vision of his own genius; but there was nothing in the beautiful flowering and fruitage which the world received from his hand which was not potentially in the mind and heart of John Foster. The silent man had come to his own; for God had given him a voice. After the long silence of a lifetime he spoke in tones which vibrated and penetrated, not like great bells swung in unison in some high tower, but like dear, familiar bells set in old sacred places, whose sweet notes are half-audible music and half-inaudible faith and prayer and worship. At first there were few to listen, for the tones were low and the noise of the time was great;

but in the end every man comes to his own, and John Foster found here and there one who heard and understood; and as the years went by the few became many, and the life sown in secret bore harvest in the wide field of the world.

And the two never parted company; for as the horizon began to kindle with Ralph Parkman's fame, there, set like a steady flame, in the dawn of a great new time, men saw the star of John Foster's pure and radiant spirit.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